

Take It From the Troopers

Fiction's Stranger Than Truth

Sidney Rescue Story Had Two Versions

By GRACE COOK

"Big city" reporters of a quarter century ago occasionally indulged in wild flights of fancy about events that occurred upstate, out of range of on-the-spot coverage. On those occasions, their stories painted verbal pictures that were far from accurate.

A classic example of the difference between imagination and reality is contained in an old 1925 clipping which Maj. L. S. Campbell has framed and hung on the wall of his ranch home on historic Pine Hill near Sidney.



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The Campbell ranch belonged, about 25 years ago, to a nurse who came from New Jersey to open a sanatorium there. Mrs. Evelyn Schmidt, a short, stocky woman in her 60s, bought the 900-acre farm with the large house and barn which had long been known as the Silver place.

In the winter of 1925 a three-day snowstorm blocked the narrow mountain road and for a week she was unable to get to town.

A New York City newspaper made a weird story out of what was common routine for the old-time horseback riders of Troop C.

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. . . and as it really happened.

SPLASHED in large letters were these headlines, "The Weird Tale of the Hermit Widow of Lone Pine Hill. How the Grey Riders Hacked a Road to Rescue Through Nature's Barriers."

The full page feature went on — "I want the State Troopers," whispered a voice over the wires, "I'm starving and it's so cold!"

"Here the connection was broken and the girl operator plugged frantically to retrieve the trembling voice. But it was useless — the line was broken somewhere.

"Having ascertained that the call came from the farmhouse of Evelyn Schmidt, an aged widow who lived on the top of Lone Pine Hill, seven miles from the nearest human habitat, the girl called the State Police and Sgt. Barry and a trooper ordered to investigate.

"Leading a packhorse laden with supplies they set out but after an hour of bucking snow-drifts that barred their way and getting nowhere they returned for aid."

... and as it really happened.

pitiful sight met their eyes. Remnants of Mrs. Smith's last repast, her pet dog, lay on the table. She had been forced to kill to save herself from starving. Mrs. Schmidt was found in the bedroom under a pile of ragged blankets, almost lifeless. . . .

"She was given warm broth and spent a delightful summer. She died in the fall and was buried by 'her boys' (the Troopers) in a secluded corner of her property. Almost a year afterward her will was read and she had left Pine Hill to the troopers."

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WHAT A BEAUTIFULLY inaccurate piece of reporting.

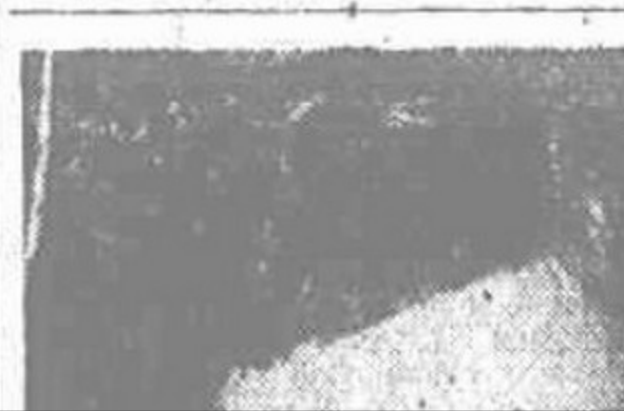
This is what really happened: There was no telephone on Pine Hill and the call came from the A. A. Hayes farm on the outskirts of town. Because the snow was so deep, Mrs. Hayes became worried and

an immaculate housekeeper.

Mrs. Schmidt drove a horse and buggy and usually stopped at the Hayes home when she came to town. They thought her a "nice old lady but a bit eccentric."

She had been a nurse and had put all her savings into the Pine Hill property intending to make a convalescent hospital out of it. She believed that she could effect cures by the laying on of hands, but no patients ever came. Then she started a mushroom project which also petered out.

At her death the following



summer she willed the farm to Capt. Fox and the local Catholic priest but as there was a \$35,000 government loan on it they turned it back to the government.

All of the troopers who made the tough ride up Pine Hill that winter's day are now retired: Captain Fox lives in Hillcrest, Sgts. Skelley and Hulse are office employes at the Scintilla Magneto plant, Mangan is with Grossinger's Hotel in Liberty and Bert (Spider) Mattox lives in California where he rides in the movies.

Some people may remember his mother, Martha Mattox, a star of the silent pictures.

Exploits of the old rough-rider troop may not have been quite as flamboyant as the big city reporter wrote it, but the troopers did complete many tough assignments and brought assistance to families who couldn't be reached in any other way.

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"Leading a packhorse laden with supplies they set out but after an hour of bucking snowdrifts that barred their way and getting nowhere they returned for aid."

"Capt. Fox then dispatched 20 troopers, mounted men laden with shovels, axes and blasting powder. For four days the little detachment hammered the mighty ice-packs and snowdrifts that crowned Pine Hill.

"A miniature glacier covered the bridge. Blasting powder and a match fixed that. In spots the path ran along a deep gorge with a perpendicular wall on the inside and a sheer drop of 300 feet on the outside."

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WHAT A BEAUTIFULLY inaccurate piece of reporting.

This is what really happened: There was no telephone on Pine Hill and the call came from the A. A. Hayes farm on the outskirts of town. Because the snow was so deep, Mrs. Hayes became worried and called Capt. Daniel E. Fox at the Barracks.

He said some of them would go up. It was five miles instead of seven but, according to the troopers who made the trip, that was far enough.

Instead of 20 men in the party there were five, Capt. Fox, Jim Skelley, Ed. Hulse, T. J. Mangin and Bert Mattox.

There was no ice-covered glacier, no bridge to blast with dynamite, no 300-foot gorge, no dead horses and no injured men. They didn't tie themselves together, but it really was tough going.

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"DEATH WAITED for the unwary man that slipped. The trail was dangerous in summer — in winter impossible. Tied together with ropes Alpine fashion the troopers wormed their way over the patch. Two horses unable to retain footing on the trail met their death at the bottom of the gorge and several troopers were injured.

"Finally after four days of continual scratching at the mountain's icy surface they sighted their objective, the little farmhouse on the summit.

No smoke issued from the chimney. Three dogs lay frozen to death on the front porch. A milk cow lay frozen in the stall. Nowhere was there a sign of life."

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They made the five miles in about three hours instead of four days but they did have to dismount and break trail for the horses.

As Jim Skelley remembers it there was a thick shiny crust on top of the drifts so that at times they were forced to crawl on their hands and knees.

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THE WIDOW SCHMIDT had three or four nice dogs but she hadn't eaten any of them nor were any frozen to death on the front porch. She didn't keep a cow and she wasn't wrapped in ragged blankets. According to Mrs. Hayes she had beautiful blankets, fine furniture and was